Fang Od and the Traditional Art of Kalinga Tattoo

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Tak tak tak tak tak tak tak….

The sound was rhythmic and steady as if following a beat. It grew more and more pleasant to my ears as Fang Od continued tapping the bamboo where the thorn penetrating my skin was attached. It maintained my focus to the pain as I watched blood spurt out of the wound. Even the loud squealing of Fang Od’s pigs failed to distract us.

Tak tak tak tak tak.

Tak tak tak tak tak tak tak….
Early that morning, I bumped into Fang Od while she was on her way to look for the thorns she was going to use in our tattoo session. As she went farther down from the village, I quit tailing her. I chickened out because the trail was wet and slippery and I was afraid to slip, but Fang Od was oblivious. Her strong legs are so used to going down that trail, rain or shine.
As she prepared her tools before the session, I was getting increasingly tensed. After she discussed with the tour guide about the design I wanted, she drew the pattern on my wrist using a piece of dried grass dipped in soot. I didn’t know how much pain I was about to endure and I didn’t know how the tattoo would look like because I let her decide what design to choose. She assured me though that it wouldn’t be very painful.
As she started tapping, every tap, every penetration of the thorn, got more painful. But it was manageable, not as painful as I feared it to be. Fang Od said the pain would only be in the beginning. The pain was only in the beginning indeed. Because you get used to it. I think I even enjoyed it. That kind of pain that doesn’t get more painful even if it lingers.

Fang Od tapped continuously, only pausing to put soot on the thorn, wipe off the tears from her eyes, face Francis, the tour guide, to answer a question or wipe the tattoo to check if the ink was getting absorbed well.
wiping her eyes
As I concentrated in my tattoo, I couldn’t help observing her. Fang Od is a charming old lady. She has a cute smile and I found her shyer than her sister, Gannao, who laughed a lot when we were there. I saw her name tattooed on her arm. She was wearing a t-shirt that had Ireland printed across it. Perhaps, the t-shirt was a gift from one traveller who she tattooed. I wished she wasn’t wearing it because it hid her shoulder and chest tattoos. I wanted to see them. All I could see were the tattoo spread over her wrinkled arms.

Only when I got used to the pain that I started asking questions which the tour guide translated to Fang Od. She answered in their dialect, Binutbut, and the tour guide in turn translated to us.

Fang Od’s parents came from different villages. Her father was from Ngibat, a tribe around two hours by foot from Butbut, while her mother was from Butbut. Since tribal wars used to be rampant in Kalinga, both villages were fighting. But because Fang Od’s father was determined to marry a lady from another tribe, he played as mediator and tried to maintain peace between their tribes.
the villagers wanted to see photos of Manila so I showed the photos in my Ipad, they got amused with how

the Ipad works too.. Fang Od beside me is using my present for her.

Fang Od is the eldest among nine siblings. We met three of her siblings in the village and only Gannao had
tattoo like Fang Od’s. It was Fang Od who tattooed her. The rest of her relatives who we met had tattoos too,
but only one or two.
Fang Od was tattooed when she was a teenager. Each of her arms took one day to be finished. They paid bundles of rice for it. When her tattoo was completed her father killed a pig to celebrate.

As opposed to some article I had read, Fang Od’s father wasn’t the one who tattooed her and she didn’t learn the art from him. She said that she was inked by an artist named Anchubang and she learned the art from watching the artist do it. She practiced it with her friends and her work eventually stood out. She realized she had the talent so she embraced the art. Marks of her practice sessions can still be seen scattered on her legs. She was known to be the last mambabatok (Kalinga tattooist) until her granddaughter started embracing the traditional art of Kalinga tattoo.
Decades ago, being tattooed meant beauty for the Kalinga women and bravery for the men. For women, it was more than being accessorized. It was their belief that their heirloom beads, usually worn as necklaces and bracelets by women, cannot be brought to the other life when they leave the Earth but their tattoo will stay with them. For men, a tattoo had to be earned through successful headhunting. Fang Od had tattooed both for beauty and headhunting success.

However, as Fang Od got more known and more visitors began arriving at Buscalan to get tattooed by her, the rules stopped being applied as to who could get which design. Anyone can get tattooed now. Anyone can choose any design.
photos of Fang Od and her clients are posted on her bedroom wall

framed photos of Fang Od sent to her... one photo is with Lars Krutak
Fang Od with a client and Grace, her granddaughter who inherited her skills
a famous actor etched his name on Fang Od’s house

She chose the “steps to rice terraces” for me. I asked her what it meant and she said healing. A good fit because I can get sickly sometimes. My tattoo was done in less than an hour and she lathered coconut oil
over it. Then she went on to tattoo my husband with a centipede design. It took longer, around an hour, but she continued tattooing without taking a break. She went on answering our questions too.

Fang Od is thankful that Francis Pa-in brings her many visitors. Francis in turn is thankful to Fang Od as well for he gets to guide visitors because of Fang Od. Fang Od, who still plants rice at her age, uses the money she earns from tattooing to buy necessities and more land for farming. She’s also able to help others in the village by lending them money when they are in need. Her house is very basic; I only saw a bed with a mattress in the bedroom on their second floor. Obviously, she doesn’t spend much for stuff that they consider unnecessary comfort. Fang Od lives a very simple life with a routine that revolves around farming and keeping her home.

Fang Od’s daily life in photos
How long is Fang Od’s hair?
villagers still do hearth cooking that’s why the matches are important
shooing the neighbor’s pigs away
peeling beans with Fang Od
surprisingly, 93-year old Fang Od climbs with ease!
93-year old Fang Od carries her granddaughter Brianna

We started that tattoo session late because it was drizzling earlier in the morning. Rain and cold meant a more painful session so the tour guide suggested we wait a little bit more for the sun. So wait we did by going around the village, meeting more locals, giving away candies to kids and matches to adults and buying knives from the blacksmiths. I looked forward to seeing more tattooed old people, and we did see a few more of them: aged, bent, and wrinkled yet still strong, like Fang Od. All we saw though were old women, tattooed and beautiful.

So I had to ask, where had the tattooed men gone?

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